

# CHEIM & READ

## MODERN PAINTERS

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### Q&A

## TAL R

*Tal R makes paintings, drawings, and sculptures, working with unique materials like rabbit-skin glue to create images that are both recognizable and unnerving. His exhibition "The Shlomo" opens this month at Cheim & Read, in New York. Scott Indrisek visited him in his Copenhagen studio to eat strawberries and discuss destruction.*

**SCOTT INDRISEK: Do you have your own paintings on the walls at your house?**

**TAL R:** Never. My house is full of objects. My work always arises from the private, but it goes through this carnival of other images, objects that I have around. Let's say there is a certain thing you experience in your life. It's not really productive in images. You need something in between. You need doormen. You need this distance so that it can be an image for other people. Otherwise it's just therapy. **You've said that one should be able to explain a painting over the telephone.**

It's a rule, but then I also ask for trouble. Every artwork should have a certain "hand" that reaches out for the audience, but the physical

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experience is completely beyond what you can explain on the phone. You can almost explain Donald Judd or Bruce Nauman over the phone. But when you see the pieces, they work on you in a different way. I want there to be normal things in my paintings that everybody can pick up, but when you stand in front of them you get insecure about what you're watching. It's like getting the viewer to the dance floor with a very cheesy pop song. If you ask people, they won't admit that they like the song, but when they hear it, they move. Or like when you put french fries on the table. People will say, "No, I don't like french fries." But then everybody's picking at the french fries. That's how the painting should work.

**Can you describe the character of the Shlomo, who is the focus of your show at Cheim & Read?**

He's a bit of an orientalist. A dreamer. Shlomo is the name of an uncle I never knew. So he's perfect to project romantic things onto. He's a wanderer. In the next few years he will walk around in different forms: falling asleep, taking a nap in different paintings, disappearing into elevators, going into doors he shouldn't go through. You try to create paintings where the viewer can wander around; now the Shlomo actually takes the position of the viewer. He's going to get lost on our behalf. Shlomo's always the secondary character. If you have a film, there's Brad Pitt and then there's the friend who is actually just taking care of the garden. And we don't follow his destiny, we follow Brad Pitt's destiny. But it's the gardener that's the most interesting.

**Is there a narrative in your mind, a progression of where he'll go?**

There is a clear progression to the images I pick up, but it is beyond my language. You invent something and afterward you talk about it. I think artists should watch out; they should admit that their work

will always be faster than language. And I think art should be beyond language—otherwise go and write a story, go and be a poet.

**What about some of your other works that are more abstract?**

Those paintings are just small details, ornaments, fractions. They are so broken down that they start to create another language. But these kinds of paintings come from something very concrete. I went on a boat with my friend, the artist Daniel Richter, to a very remote part of Greenland. For three weeks we were just drawing every day. Clouds, mountains, and sea. So I did this whole group of drawings in Greenland and I took them back to the studio and I started working with them, just paint on paper.



You pull out stuff. You take it one step away from the drawing you made in front of the sea and the mountains and the clouds. And what now looks like a weird line is actually a detail of clouds, mountains, and the reflection of the sea. You pull it through a system, and then at the end something beautiful happens: It's completely not connected anymore to Greenland. It's just in itself; it's close to not even being art. It's just a very simple gesture and then it's gone.

**You're removing constantly between different media.**

With some works, you don't start at a point where you know that they will be successful, that they will really rise up and be a grand sculpture—you start from a place where they really look like shit. You want to do a certain sculpture or figure, and while you're doing it you get red cheeks because you know this is a grand failure. But pay close attention to that moment, because although something is failing, great possibilities are right around the corner. Also, in an artist's production there are works that you can only understand because of something else the artist did. Not all of the works are main works. Some of the works are what the artist did to go from A to C.

I think my way into painting came from missteps. For many years: having a great idea, disappointment, destroying it. The only thing that happened to me was that I got a little tired, so I started destroying slowly, and a lot of my painting style arose from this destroying slowly.

**What do you mean?**

I mean when you do a painting and it's awful and you want to step on it. After some years of this circle of disappointment, you're tired, so you take the painting and just put dots on it. A very slow, aggressive way of destroying it. But then something happens: The painting looks back and says, "Maybe I am possible."

**What other painters do you feel an affinity with?**

There are certain painters over the years that I continue liking. I just went to Paris and saw Georges Rouault again, who painted clowns and also nuns, priests, Jesus. But at the moment I'm more into these painters who are trying to develop narrative spaces: Bonnard, Balthus, Vallotton. That's really heavy weight for a painter, to try and do a space where you can maneuver, to try and do faces, figures. I want to make concrete rooms where the experience is absolutely abstract.

**Your studio looks like a domestic space, like a living room.**

If you're here for long periods, it's nice to be able to fall asleep. Before, I used to lie on the floor among the works, stand up and continue. There was this elegant warp between walking and sleeping, working and walking and sleeping. So I have two beds here now and I'm building a third. To find routes, to find new paths into the work, you have to be around them a lot. You want to really, at the end of the day, surprise yourself, because what surprises you will surprise the viewer. Unpredictable moves on the dance floor.